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ABSTRACT

This digest summarizes some of the recent research regarding school-based management (SBM). In particular, it addresses two questions: (1) Is SBM working, and (2) What can schools changing to an SBM system do to ensure success? Information is presented on what type of SBM system works best, research on SBM success, the kinds of problems encountered in an SBM system, the responsibilities of stakeholders, and the best way to change to an SBM system. Barriers to SBM frequently include lack of knowledge by participants about what SBM is and how it works; lack of decision-making skills, communication, and trust among stakeholders; statutes, regulations, and union contracts that curtail decision-making authority and teachers' time involvement; and the reluctance of some administrators to share decision-making authority. SBM success requires an understanding among stakeholders about SBM, how it is implemented, and their new roles and responsibilities; district support; and adequate time (3-15 years). (LMI)

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# ERIC DIGEST

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## School-Based Management

*By Lori Jo Oswald*

School-based management (SBM), defined as the decentralization of decision-making authority to the school site, is one of the most popular strategies that came out of the 1980s school reform movement. Over the past decade, many school districts have implemented this method of managing school budgeting, curriculum, and personnel decisions and are enthusiastically promoting it.

Proponents of SBM say that it provides better programs for students because resources will be available to directly match student needs. Also, advocates assert SBM ensures higher quality decisions because they are made by groups instead of individuals. Finally, proponents argue that it increases communication among the stakeholders, including school boards, superintendents, principals, teachers, parents, community members, and students.

But others are not so sure that SBM accomplishes any substantial changes. Anita A. Summers and Amy W. Johnson (1995) conclude that there is "virtually no evidence that SBM translates into improved student performance." This Digest summarizes some of the recent research regarding SBM. In particular it addresses two questions: (1) Is SBM working? and (2) What can schools changing to an SBM system do to ensure success?

### What Type of SBM System Works Best?

Part of the problem with evaluating SBM is that there are so many variations on how it is put into practice. In an SBM system, authority can transfer from the state government to school boards, from school boards to superintendents, from superintendents to principals, from principals to other members of the school community such as teachers and parents, or some combination of two or more of these.

Not only are there variations about how SBM is practiced, but schools and districts implementing SBM vary widely in *what* decisions are distributed. For example, a school may have an active school council—made up of teachers, parents, and the principal—involved in drawing up budgets, hiring and firing, and determining curriculum. Other school councils merely advise the principal in such decisions. Or the council membership might be only teachers, or the council's decisions may be limited to such topics as fundraising or textbook selection.

For SBM to work successfully, the principal must use a team approach to decision-making. If this is done, supporters of SBM say, teachers will feel more positive toward school leaders and more committed to school goals and objectives. Parents and community members will be more supportive of schools because they have more of a say over decisions.

Principals benefit by receiving input from other stakeholders, thereby being aware of teacher and parent concerns before they get out of control, as well as being freer to research new ideas and teaching methods and deal with problem areas.

### How Successful Is SBM?

Research has not found a link between SBM and gains in student academic achievement, lower dropout rates, increased attendance, and reduced disciplinary problems. But as Wohlstetter and colleagues (1994) explain, "Improving school performance may be an unrealistic expectation for a *governance* reform that alters the balance of power within educational systems toward schools."

Drury and Levin (1994) say that SBM contributes to four "intermediate" outcomes, which in turn have the "potential" to lead to improved student achievement: increased efficiency in use of resources and personnel, increased professionalism of teachers, implementation of curriculum reform, and increased community engagement.

High-performing SBM schools have combined the governance reform of SBM with "an overall push for curriculum and instructional reform," says Wohlstetter (in Oswald 1995). With this combination, she argues, councils can focus on ways to "improve student academic performance and make schools more interesting places to work." Without that combination, "SBM becomes a political reform whereby the council at the school site ends up spending its time deciding who is empowered and who isn't."

Some schools do not make instruction their top priority. For schools implementing SBM, the advise from researchers and educators is clear: conduct frequent assessments and focus the stakeholders' attention on instruction instead of politics.

### What Problems May Be Encountered?

Some of the problems that SBM stakeholders might encounter in-

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clude more work for stakeholders, less efficiency, uneven school performance, an increased need for staff development, confusion about new roles and responsibilities, and coordination difficulties (Prasch 1990). Another problem is accountability. A school may want authority over decisions, but the public (and state statutes) will still hold the school board accountable for the results of those decisions. State and district policies may also require school board and district involvement. SBM is a "complex undertaking, raising multiple policy issues involving lines of authority for making decisions and responsibility and accountability for the consequences of such decisions," warns the National School Boards Association (NSBA) (1994).

Barriers that may prevent SBM from being implemented successfully include lack of knowledge by stakeholders of what SBM is and how it works; lack of decision-making skills, communication, and trust among stakeholders; statutes, regulations, and union contracts that restrict decision-making authority and teachers' time involvement; and the reluctance of some administrators and teachers to allow others to take over decision-making authority.

When stakeholders are informed beforehand, they can make sure each barrier is dealt with before SBM is implemented. Two essential elements are adequate training about SBM and clarification of roles and responsibilities and expected outcomes to stakeholders. Also, advises the NSBA, all involved must understand "*which* decisions should be shared, by *whom*, and at *what level* in the organization."

## What Are the Responsibilities of Stakeholders?

Although there are many varieties of SBM, a review of studies on SBM and interviews with its practitioners led to the following generally accepted descriptions of stakeholders' roles and responsibilities.

The NSBA recommends that district policies "should focus the attention of shared decision-making teams on developing and implementing a plan for improving student learning." This can be accomplished by the district setting "measurable goals linking the vision of the district's future with its action plan for getting there." Through such a plan, the school board can ensure "coherence and continuity throughout the district and over time."

The key word that describes the administration's role in SBM is *facilitate*. The district office facilitates instead of controls schools' actions by formulating and defining the district's general polices and educational objectives. The superintendent and district office also provide professional development opportunities, encourage risk-taking and experimentation in teaching methods, serve as models by using SBM themselves, and create communication links between the school and district staff (David 1989).

At the building level, the principal is usually the key figure in fostering shared governance within the school. Principals not only have increased responsibility and authority in school program, curriculum, and personnel decisions, but also increased accountability for student and program success. Principals must be excellent team leaders and delegators.

Teacher empowerment and accountability are major ingredients of SBM. Teachers influence decisions by participating in planning, developing, monitoring, and improving instructional programs within the school.

Involvement of parents is essential to successful implementation of SBM. Ultimately, the argument for parent involvement rests on two benefits to children: better attitudes toward school and higher grades.

## What Is the Best Way to Change to an SBM System?

To ensure SBM success, stakeholders need to understand what SBM is and how it is implemented. Each participant must understand his or her new roles, responsibilities, and accountability. School and district leaders must be supportive of SBM and ensure that communication channels will be kept open. Most of all, SBM must be given time to succeed; researchers recommend anywhere from three to fifteen years' minimum commitment to SBM.

Schools changing to an SBM system should do the following: make sure there is a firm commitment to SBM at the state, district, and school levels from the outset; seek out a qualified SBM consultant; be willing to accept that during the transition mistakes will be made; and reward stakeholders for performance.

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